

Inclusive education in Tanzanian private primary schools: access and barriers for children with disabilities

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Abstract. This study examines the accessibility of inclusive education and barriers that hinder enrolment for children with disabilities in private primary schools in the Kilimanjaro region, Tanzania. The study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design. It involved 35 participants, all of whom were purposefully selected. Data were collected through interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews and were thematically analysed based on Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings revealed that low enrolment rates of children with disabilities in private schools are due to four barriers: reluctance of school owners to admit these children, high education costs, competitive pressures, and lack of awareness among parents and the community. However, the enrolled children were retained until they completed school. The study recommends raising awareness and developing training programmes for school owners and staff on inclusive education practices. It also suggests fostering collaboration between private schools and local government to create more inclusive environments and reduce costs through financial support and partnerships.

Keywords: inclusive education, private schools, children with disabilities

1. Introduction

Inclusive education for children with disabilities (CWDs) has gained momentum globally as a fundamental human right for ensuring equitable access to quality education for all [5, 16]. The global population of individuals with disabilities, including 120 million children and adolescents, now accounts for approximately 10% of the world's population [26]. This significant demographic entity creates a need for educational systems to provide inclusive learning environments that cater to all learners' diverse needs in both public and private primary schools [35].

The global advocacy for inclusive education has mainly been driven by organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF. These organisations emphasise educational settings that enhance equal opportunities for CWDs to access education alongside their non-disabled peers [8]. Bani Odeh and Lach [5] reviews the global barriers to inclusive education, focusing on different issues, including policy gaps and resource shortages. However, their descriptive approach lacks depth in specific contexts, such as Tanzania and unique challenges private schools face, which this study addresses through a qualitative approach. Likewise, using a mixed-methods approach, Hopkins [18] examines teacher beliefs toward inclusive education in the U.S.. This study's findings reveal a low enrolment of CWDs in private schools (1%). Although the study helps identify attitudinal barriers that hinder inclusive education, its focus on the U.S. education system and

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*Educational
Dimension*



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emphasis on teacher perceptions limit its applicability to Tanzania's private school context. This is because, in Tanzania, barriers such as financial costs and inadequate infrastructure are more critical.

In other contexts, private schools are criticised for being unfair in their educational provision. In Sweden, Hunt [19] critiques competition in private schools, arguing that it enlarges social inequalities, particularly for marginalised groups, including the CWDs. Although the study links privatisation to inequity, Hunt's theoretical focus lacks data on specific barriers, which this study provides. In India, Kumar et al. [23] highlights persistent discrimination in private schools despite the mandates they have to enrol marginalised groups, including the CWDs. Kumar et al.'s quantitative focus on enrolment data reveals policy implementation gaps, but it lacks qualitative insights into stakeholders' experiences, a gap this study filled with interviews and focus group discussions. In Kenya, Ireri et al. [21] analyses policy strategies for inclusive education, emphasising public school challenges but giving limited insights into the private schools, which this study focused on. However, the private schools in Kenya have also faced criticism for reinforcing inequality in education through student discrimination and abuse [1], signifying that inequality practices exist across national contexts.

In the Tanzanian context, private institutions, especially religious charities, made initial efforts to educate and integrate CWDs into mainstream education. These efforts intensified with the Salamanca Statement of 1994 [51], which advocated for inclusive education for CWDs [28]. Mkongo's study on children with hearing impairment in inclusive pre-primary settings provides historical context and education status for these children. However, the study is limited by its narrow focus on one disability type, educational level, and public schools, overlooking the diverse disabilities that this study explores.

Other studies [11, 33, 50] on inclusive education for CWDs in Tanzania focus on public primary schools, thus leaving a gap in understanding the contributions of the private institutions. For example, Charles and Otieno [11] explored the perceptions of students and teachers on the methodologies used in implementing inclusive education. Revelian and Tibategeza [33] examined how school culture contributes to implementing inclusive education, while Wambura [50] investigated educators' perceptions of policies and strategies to support disability-inclusive education.

The Tanzanian government has implemented policies such as the Education and Training Policy of 2014, revised in 2023 [47], the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010 [38], and the National Policy on Disability of 2004 [48] to strengthen inclusive education. To sustain these efforts, the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE) was introduced in phases (2009-2017 [27], 2018-2021 [39], and 2021/22-2025/26 [40]), outlining various strategies for supporting CWDs [31]. Despite these efforts, low enrolment persists in private schools in Tanzania [46]. The data supporting this argument are based on the enrolment of the CWDs in the years 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, as shown in table 1.

Table 1 reveals a positive trend in the enrollment of CWDs in primary schools from 2018 to 2023, with total numbers nearly doubling. Public primary schools consistently enrolled most of these children, with enrollment percentages remaining above 96% each year (2018 to 2023). This reflects their dominant role in inclusive education. Conversely, private schools exhibited a fluctuating trend in enrolment. It peaked from 2018 to 2020 and gradually decreased to just 1.03% in 2023. This change suggests possible challenges in private schools, such as limited accessibility or affordability within the private sector or a growing reliance on public schools influenced by supportive government policies or initiatives. These data emphasise the critical role of public schools in advancing inclusive education while drawing

Table 1

Enrolment of stage I–III children with disabilities in public and private primary schools from 2018 to 2023 (from the regional data [41–46]).

Year	Public primary schools		Private primary schools		Total	
	Number	Percent (%)	Number	Percent (%)	Number	Percent (%)
2018	10,627	97.6	256	2.4	10,883	100
2019	11,635	97.4	308	2.6	11,943	100
2020	13,486	96.5	493	3.5	13,979	100
2021	14,383	97.7	337	2.3	14,720	100
2022	16,887	98.4	267	1.6	17,154	100
2023	19,307	98.97	201	1.03	19,508	100

attention to the gaps and possible barriers in private schools. Consequently, these data highlight the importance of investigating the accessibility of inclusive education within private schools and addressing the barriers that limit enrolment opportunities for CWDs.

Building on this observation, it is important to note that most existing studies on inclusive education in Tanzania [11, 33, 50] have predominantly focused on public schools. The limited attention to private schools has created gaps in understanding their contributions to the education of CWDs, which could impede progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, this study aimed to bridge this gap by examining the accessibility and barriers private primary schools face in enrolling CWDs. Specifically, the study focuses on private primary schools in Moshi District, Kilimanjaro region, Tanzania, to identify enablers and barriers to inclusive education. The insights gained seek to inform stakeholders, including government authorities and private school owners, on the need to develop strategies that enhance the participation of private schools in inclusive education initiatives. To carry it out, this study was guided by three research questions:

1. How do private primary schools contribute to access inclusive education for CWDs?
2. What are the enablers of inclusive education for CWDs in private primary schools?
3. What are the barriers to inclusive education for CWDs in private primary schools?

2. Theoretical context

This study was guided by the social equity theory of education. The theory emerged from the contributions of various scholars, including John Rawls [3], Paulo Freire [13], and John Dewey [30]. These scholars shaped the understanding of educational equity and justice from the 1960s to the 1970s [15]. The theory highlights that all individuals are entitled to equitable access to quality education, regardless of their social background, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or disability [12]. It emphasises the need for a fair distribution of educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes to advance social justice and fairness [9].

This theory critiques how education systems can maintain the existing social inequalities through financial disparities, school segregation, curriculum biases, and discriminatory educational policies, contributing to unequal opportunities and outcomes [20]. Specific attention is directed towards removing barriers that hinder access to education, especially for children with disabilities, and promoting policies and practices that ensure fairness, inclusivity, and equal opportunities. The theory also advocates for inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices and equitable

resource allocation, aiming to enhance accessibility, diversity, and social justice in education [17].

The theory emphasises the principles of inclusivity and the responsibility of schools to enrol and support CWDs. The theory posits that fairness and justice should be central to educational practices, thus ensuring that all pupils have equal access to quality education regardless of their ability. Adequate resources and support systems are integral to realising this goal [22]. Based on these explanations, the social equity theory was judged relevant for analysing access to inclusive education for children with disabilities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilising a multiple holistic case study design to gather detailed information about inclusive education for CWDs in private primary schools by exploring the participants' ideas, perspectives, and experiences [52]. Using a qualitative approach allowed the researchers to convey the participants' opinions and perspectives, reflecting their work environment's reality. This demonstrated how they contributed to educating children with disabilities, as data were typically collected from the participants' settings. The case study design was chosen because it is particularly well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts [52]. Inclusive education involves interactions between practices, resources, and stakeholders, which are best examined through a contextually grounded approach. This design facilitated comparative analysis across four private primary schools, each serving as an individual unit of analysis. This approach facilitated a holistic understanding of how inclusive education is implemented and experienced in different settings, capturing each school's unique challenges and practices while identifying common themes and patterns [24]. Moreover, the design aligned with the study's objectives, which aimed to capture the participants' perspectives in their natural environments and uncover rich, detailed data [14]. The choice of this design was further justified by its ability to accommodate multiple data collection methods as used in this study, which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2. Sample size and sampling procedures

The study involved 35 participants selected from Moshi District in the Kilimanjaro region. The sample included four head teachers from the four private primary schools, 20 classroom teachers, 10 parents of CWDs enrolled in these schools, and a district special education officer (DSEO). Four of the 39 private primary schools in the district were purposively selected as they were the only schools enrolling CWDs and providing education within inclusive settings [46]. The selection of head teachers and a DSEO was intentional, as they possessed critical insights regarding the accessibility and enrolment of CWDs in private primary schools and the implementation of inclusive education within these institutions. Furthermore, the classroom teachers were purposively selected based on their experience in teaching inclusive classes with CWDs. Five classroom teachers were chosen per school. Moreover, all parents of CWDs were invited to participate in the study through the head teachers, as they play a primary role in their children's education. However, only those parents who were available and willing to share their perspectives were included, resulting in 10 participating parents.

3.3. Data collection methods

Using semi-structured interviews, document reviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and observational methods, data were collected from the 1st of March to the 31st of

March 2024. The semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions to gather data from a DSEO, head teachers and parents of CWDs. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with individual participants in a private place. All the interviews were conducted at the working stations during working hours at the agreed time. The interviews were conducted in Swahili, a widely used language in Tanzania. The interview guide was developed in English, translated into Kiswahili by a professional translator, and back-translated to ensure accuracy. Each participant had one interview session, which lasted for about 50 minutes.

Focus group discussions were conducted in four groups, each representing a private school and comprising five teachers teaching inclusive classes with CWDs. The aim was to explore teachers' experiences with the retention and completion of education for CWDs. The FGD took place in schools, and each discussion lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. The first author conducted both the interviews and FGDs. To ensure the collection of all essential data, the researcher used a tape recorder and a notebook to document the information. Also, this study reviewed admission books, attendance registers, academic reports, and schools' strategic plans to understand the enrolment, retention, transition, and completion of CWDs in these schools. An observation checklist was used to assess the school's infrastructure and its suitability for accommodating enrolled CWDs.

3.4. Data analysis procedure

The collected data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's [10] six-phase framework. The procedures for data analysis included six key steps: familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing emerging themes, defining themes, and writing up the report. Familiarity with data included transcribing verbal data, reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse in content, and taking initial notes to identify potential patterns, ideas, or themes [36]. Initial coding was applied across the entire dataset by segmenting the data and assigning concise labels (codes) to extracts aligned with the research questions. During the theme searching phase, related codes were grouped to identify overarching patterns and relationships, often visualised through thematic maps or diagrams to highlight connections [6]. Emerging themes were then reviewed to ensure they aligned with the coded extracts and the overall datasets, verifying their relevance to research questions. Themes were subsequently defined by giving detailed descriptions of their unique characteristics, specifying their contributions to the analysis, and ensuring they were distinct yet connected to the dataset as a whole. Finally, the report was written incorporating supporting evidence such as direct quotes from the participants.

3.5. Trustworthiness and credibility

Multiple data collection methods were employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, documentary reviews, and observations. The research tools were also reviewed in collaboration with two researchers from the University of Dodoma. Moreover, a pilot study was conducted involving one head teacher, two classroom teachers and one parent in a non-participating school to refine the clarity of the questions.

3.6. Ethical issues

This study adhered to ethical research practices, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring voluntary participation, and upholding research integrity. The research clearance was obtained from the University of Dodoma and used to obtain permission to access the private primary schools and participants.

4. Findings

This section presents the study findings regarding the accessibility of education for CWDs in private primary schools and the barriers that influence the provision of education for these children. The findings are presented in three main themes that align with the research questions. Based on the findings and the main themes, sub-themes were created, as summarised in table 2.

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes of findings [37].

S/N	Theme	Sub-themes
1	Access to inclusive education	• Enrolment, retention, and completion of education rate
2	Enablers of inclusive education	• Infrastructure • Resources • Support services
3	Barriers to inclusive education	• Reluctance of school owners • High cost • Awareness of parents and community • Competitive pressures

4.1. Access to inclusive education in private primary schools

The study assessed the enrolment, retention, and completion of education for CWDs in private primary schools, alongside the availability of infrastructure, facilities, resources, and support services. Data for this assessment were collected through interviews, observation, documentary review, and focus group discussions. A documentary review was done to supplement the data obtained from the interviews.

The findings in this study revealed that only four out of 39 private primary schools within the Moshi District Council had provided inclusive education and enrolled CWDs from 2017 to March 2024. Over these seven years, 13 CWDs were enrolled across the four schools. The annual enrolment of CWDs in each of these schools is summarised in table 3. Notably, as of March 2024, no child with disability had been enrolled, as recorded at the time of data collection.

Table 3

Enrolment of children with disabilities in sampled schools from 2017 to 2023 [37].

Year	School A	School B	School C	School D	Total
2017	0	NE	1	0	1
2018	0	NE	0	0	0
2019	1	0	1	1	3
2020	2	0	1	0	3
2021	0	1	0	0	1
2022	1	2	1	0	4
2023	0	0	1	0	1
Total	4	3	5	1	13

NE: not established

Table 3 provides an overview of the enrollment trends of children with disabilities in four private primary schools (School A, School B, School C, and School D) from 2017

to 2023, with 13 children enrolled across all schools. School C shows the highest cumulative enrolment (5 children) and consistent participation across most years, suggesting it may have been more accessible than the others. School A comes next with four enrolments, experiencing its peak participation in 2020. School B was not established until 2019, but it enrolled CWDs between 2019 and 2023, achieving its highest enrolment in 2022. School D struggled with just one enrolment recorded in 2019, showing limited participation overall. Yearly totals highlight significant fluctuations, with no enrolment in 2018 and a peak of 4 children in 2022. Overall, the data demonstrate variability in enrolment and possible challenges related to accessibility or demand within the community.

With connection to this, during the interview, the district special education officer (DSEO) stated:

We have four private schools currently enrolling children with disabilities who study with other children. We do not have a special private school that caters for children with special needs. For example, we currently do not have any deaf or blind children in these schools, as these pupils require special schools or units. (Interview with the DSEO, on the 18/3/2024)

The above quote indicates that while the four private primary schools were offering inclusive education, they were not equipped to fully support all types of disabilities, especially severe ones, such as deafness or blindness. This suggests that these pupils may not receive adequate education in mainstream settings. It highlights the need for more inclusive educational options to meet the diverse needs of all children with disabilities.

During the interviews, the headteachers of these schools were asked why they were not enrolling all children regardless of their disabilities. The headteachers reported enrolling CWDs based on the type and severity of the disability, since other CWDs required extensive specialised support, including specific teaching materials and special education teachers. These findings are supported by one of the headteachers, who had this to say:

We mainly enrol children with physical disabilities and albinism, as we can accommodate them in our regular classes. However, we cannot enrol children with severe disabilities, such as those who are deaf or those with blindness, as we lack the specialised resources and specialist teachers who can support them effectively. (Interview with the Headteacher of School D, on the 22/3/2024)

The headteacher's explanations in the quote above reveal that the enrolment of CWDs in private primary schools is selective, since not all kinds of CWDs are accepted. The statement acknowledges a limitation in enrolling children with severe disabilities, like those who are deaf or blind, due to a lack of specialised resources and trained teachers. This highlights the school's commitment to inclusivity while also recognising the need for specific support systems to serve all types of disabilities effectively.

Conversely, the findings indicated that the retention of enrolled CWDs in private primary schools was high and satisfactory. Experiences have shown that all enrolled children remain in school without any dropouts; thus, the likelihood of completion is elevated. Evidence from data triangulated from interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews corroborated the positive outcomes in retention, transition, and completion of education for these children in private schools. The classroom teachers who participated in the FGDs elaborated on their strategies to support the successful completion of enrolled CWDs, as they were quoted explaining:

We advise parents to accept their children's condition and not discourage them; instead, work together to support them. They should encourage and motivate their children in their studies by using success stories of people with disabilities as examples to inspire the children that they can also excel academically and succeed like others. This includes motivating the children not to lose hope so that they can achieve their educational goals. (Teacher A1, FGD on the 19/3/2024)

Likewise, another teacher had this to say:

Usually, we create an environment that makes children with disabilities have confidence among their peers, feel equal, and be eager to attend school every day. Therefore, we fulfil our responsibilities of understanding and serving these children well by listening to them and visiting their homes. (Teacher C2, FGD on the 21/3/2024)

The quotes above highlight that teachers in private primary schools create a supportive and inclusive environment for CWDs. They create a space where these children feel confident and equal among their peers. The quotes also show that teachers insist parents accept their CWDs and work collaboratively to encourage and motivate them.

4.2. Enablers of inclusive education in private primary schools

4.2.1. Infrastructure

The study examined the presence of specialised infrastructure, equipment, and facilities designed and modified to support CWDs in their learning and enable them to access the school environment effectively. This included accessible classrooms, toilets, dining areas, playgrounds, the overall outdoor environment, and assistive devices used by CWDs. Findings from observation revealed that the infrastructure at the studied private primary schools had a good, accessible, and inclusive infrastructure. Most classrooms, libraries, toilets, and other areas were well-designed and accessible to CWDs. In supporting this, during interview sessions, one of the headteachers said: "Our school infrastructure is friendly to the children with disabilities we have enrolled. All the environments, including classrooms, libraries, toilets, and others, are well-designed and accessible. We have special ramps for those using wheelchairs."

The private schools had modified their infrastructure to accommodate diverse CWDs. For example, they had modified the pathways by creating ramps to accommodate wheelchair users. The headteacher of this school explained that they had to modify the school's infrastructure after enrolling a child with a physical disability, thus, a wheelchair user. This headteacher was quoted as saying:

The infrastructure is now accessible; we modified it when we enrolled a child using a wheelchair. It was necessary to make him move freely... So, we put ramps up to the toilet. We have set up the infrastructure because we know others who use wheelchairs will come. (Interview with the Headteacher of School D, on the 22/3/2024)

Besides, in the interview with the DSEO about the accessibility in terms of infrastructure for CWDs in private schools, the DSEO had this to say:

All the schools being built now, including private ones, must follow the standards set by the government, which require that all public-service buildings be inclusive and accessible to everyone who needs the services. So, many private schools have disability-friendly infrastructure. (Interview with the DSEO, on the 18/3/2024)

The quotes from the headteachers and DSEOs collectively emphasise a strong commitment to creating inclusive and accessible school infrastructure for CWDs. They highlight proactive modifications to accommodate CWDs, such as installing ramps and ensuring that facilities like classrooms and toilets are accessible. Furthermore, the adherence to government standards for new schools, both public and private, highlights a societal acknowledgement of the importance of inclusivity in education. This issue addresses current needs and anticipates future demands, thus reflecting a broader community responsibility to ensure equitable access for all learners.

4.2.2. Resources

The study explored the presence of specialist teachers for teaching CWDs and the support services they were providing. During the interviews with headteachers and DSEO, they acknowledged the lack of special education teachers in these schools. Only one of the four schools involved in the study had three special education teachers. All participants cited the absence of special education teachers as one of the reasons these private schools were not accepting children with severe disabilities. However, there were different views on the lack of special education teachers in these schools. During the interview, the headteacher of school A was quoted as saying:

Special education teachers are not readily available as colleges that train them in Tanzania are few. So, we cannot solely rely on those colleges to produce enough teachers to serve all schools, and competing with the government in hiring these teachers is difficult because many teachers prefer to be employed by the government for job security reasons. So, it is difficult to recruit and hire them in private schools. (Interview with the Headteacher of School A, on the 19/3/2024)

The quote from the headteacher of School A contrasts with the quote from the headteacher of School B, who had employed three special education teachers. The headteacher of school B said the following “Special education teachers are currently available in the job market due to the limited number of government employment opportunities, thus making it relatively easy to find qualified candidates”. The varying viewpoints among these head teachers suggest that the shortage of special education teachers in private primary schools stems from a reluctance to hire them rather than a lack of available candidates.

4.2.3. Support services

Regarding the support services provided to CWDs, the study identified several services, including food, accommodation, transportation, scholarship funding, and Individualised Education Programmes (IEPs), all of which contributed to the enrolment of these children in private schools. For example, scholarship funding significantly impacted the presence of these children, as two out of the four schools offering education for CWDs had full scholarship support, where the parents did not have to contribute anything, thus allowing the child to attend school for free.

Another school provided scholarships but required parents to cover additional costs, such as clothing, food, and medical expenses. Additionally, one school was offering a 25% reduction in tuition fees. To elaborate on this, one headteacher said the following:

Regarding the supportive services provided to children here at the school, all children have financial assistance for their studies; they are provided with food at school, health services, and uniforms, all for free. The school has sponsors. (Interview with the Headteacher of School B, on the 20/3/2024)

Alongside this, the headteacher of School A added:

Support services are available for all pupils. There is food and transportation service for pupils. The school is a day school. We have also provided a 25% fee reduction for two pupils with disabilities. (Interview with the headteacher of School A, on the 19/3/2024)

The quotes highlight the support services offered by the private schools, emphasising their commitment to ensuring that all children, particularly those with disabilities, have access to essential resources to alleviate barriers to education. However, this perspective was different from that of other parents, as one of the parents was quoted as saying:

The owners of private schools need to understand that not every child with a disability who comes to study in a private school wants to be assisted. However, some can be self-reliant, as their parents can afford the child's education. So, they should not hesitate to admit children with disabilities. However, it is difficult to make someone understand who is not ready. (Parent of a child with disability, on the 29/3/2024)

This parent's perspective suggests that some private schools are reluctant to admit CWDs due to concerns about parents' ability to pay tuition fees. They fear admitting such children may lead to them needing to study for free or requiring additional support from the school. However, changing the school owners' misconceptions about this issue is challenging.

The study examined whether private schools had specific advertisements for the admission of CWDs. All four schools in this study confirmed that they were not creating targeted advertisements to attract and enrol CWDs. Instead, these children were being enrolled through various means based on how their parents were learning about the schools, as noted by one headteacher during the interviews:

We do not specifically advertise enrollment for children with disabilities, but they join the school after their parents or guardians hear about another disabled child studying here. We do not advertise that we accept these children because we do not have adequate infrastructure and special education teachers to serve all kinds of disabilities. We only accept them when they come to us, based on their specific disabilities and whether we can accommodate them. (Interview with the Headteacher of School A, on the 19/3/2024)

The findings showed that the absence of specific advertisements about the admission and education of CWDs contributes to their low enrolment, hence limiting the educational opportunities for these children. Many parents struggle to enrol their CWDs in schools because they are unaware of which schools can accommodate them. Targeted advertising would assist parents in identifying suitable schools for their children's education.

However, the findings revealed that CWDs enrolled in private primary schools were attending lessons well, thus transitioning well from one class to another, and completing primary education without dropping out. This was explained by the study participants, who outlined the strategies and experiences used by teachers and caregivers to ensure that these children succeed in completing their educational journey, as one headteacher was quoted as saying during the interviews:

The good services we provide to CWDs ensure their daily school attendance; they have full sponsorship and are provided with food, health services,

uniforms, etc. Also, the teachers teach them well and encourage them. Sports also attract them to come to school. (Interview with the Headteacher of School B, on the 20/3/2024)

The reviewed documents revealed that all four private schools studied maintained pupil admission books, attendance registers, and academic report registers, indicating that CWDs were being enrolled, attending classes, and transitioning between classes effectively. One school had a dedicated admission book for CWDs, transferring eligible pupils to the general admission book once they could read, count, and write. Although all four schools had a strategic plan in place for at least three years, only one explicitly aimed to enrol and educate CWDs, and this school also employed special education teachers.

The review revealed that providing inclusive education for CWDs was not a long-term goal in most schools, which impacts their effective implementation of inclusive practices. This lack of long-term planning results in insufficient resources, such as trained teachers and learning materials. Three schools provided education to CWDs based on the immediate need rather than a strategic plan, thus reflecting their selective approach to enrolment and a lack of special education staff. Based on the foregoing, a long-term strategic plan is crucial for effectively executing an institution's responsibilities. Without such a plan, the quality of services may decline, thus hindering the achievement of the institutional goals.

4.3. Barriers to inclusive education for children with disabilities in private primary schools

The findings revealed limited participation by private primary schools in enrolling and educating CWDs. To explore this situation, the study investigated the reasons for the low enrolment of CWDs in private primary schools. Participants highlighted various reasons for the low enrolment of CWDs in private primary schools, as discussed hereunder.

4.3.1. Reluctance of school owners to admit children with disabilities

The study findings indicated that one reason for the low enrolment of CWDs in private schools was the reluctance of school owners and administrators to admit them. It was found that some private school owners did not want to accept CWDs because they did not understand the importance of collaborating with the government to support these children educationally. All participants addressed the issue of school owners' reluctance. One of the headteachers was quoted during the interview as saying:

Participation in private schools is a big challenge. Many school owners are not ready to admit children with disabilities. You know, private schools tend to avoid trouble. For some, admitting these children is seen as trouble. For instance, some school owners are concerned as to who will take them to the toilet, and so on. That is why many private schools do not want to admit them to avoid this kind of trouble. (Interview with the Headteacher of School D, on the 22/3/2024)

To further explore the reasons for the low enrolment of CWDs in private schools, the study interviewed the DSEO, who gave insights during the conversation:

To a large extent, the private school owners have not yet awakened to the desire to help children with disabilities. These are the institutions that could have assisted the government, as their environment is better than

that of government schools, but the willingness of those owners is very low. I have not seen anyone with a strong willingness to establish a unit to serve children with special needs. (Interview with the DSEO, on the 18/3/2024)

The quotes above highlight a dominant reluctance among private schools to admit CWDs, often viewing their enrolment as a burden rather than an opportunity. Additionally, the quotes suggest that private school owners had not fully recognised their potential role in handling CWDs despite having better resources than many public schools. This lack of awareness and commitment reflects a bigger issue of unwillingness to embrace inclusivity and support for vulnerable populations in educational settings.

Parents who gave feedback for this study expressed their views on the role of private schools in educating CWDs. They emphasised that private schools should not view CWDs as a burden but should proactively support these children. The findings revealed that some parents were financially capable and would wish to enrol their children in private schools, but they faced barriers due to schools' refusal to admit their children. On this matter, one parent illustrated by saying:

Some private schools claim they lack the time to address the challenges faced by these children, viewing them as burdens. While some parents want to enrol their children with disabilities in private schools, some teachers' negative attitudes create hesitation. (Interview with a parent, on the 29/3/2024)

This parent's view indicates that some private schools were unwilling to admit CWDs, but the government could educate them on the importance of supporting these children. This would increase CWDs' access to education.

4.3.2. High cost associated with educating children with disabilities

Participants explained that educating CWDs involved significant costs, including purchasing teaching and learning materials and upgrading the infrastructure to accommodate their needs. These costs were found to complicate the school management, thus making even schools accepting CWDs impose high fees and service charges. Consequently, many private schools opted not to enrol CWDs to avoid these expenses. In explaining this, one teacher shared his thoughts by saying:

The numerous taxes imposed by the government on private schools are also a contributing factor. There are many fees that schools must pay, thus making it very costly to operate a school. These include administrative fees, school inspections, business licenses, contributions for electricity, annual student fees, mandatory exam fees, and transportation costs for students who use the school buses. This financial burden discourages private schools from providing education for children with disabilities, as it raises the operational costs. The government should explore ways to reduce these taxes to encourage private school owners to enrol and educate children with disabilities. (Interview with the Headteacher of School B, on the 20/3/2024)

The above quote indicates that private schools face numerous financial obligations to the government, making it challenging for owners to invest in the education of CWDs who require specialised equipment and resources. The teacher emphasised the need for the government to consider reducing some of these taxes and providing private schools with financial relief so they could focus more on supporting CWDs.

4.3.3. Awareness of parents and community

Participants reported that many parents and the community were unaware of the private schools that were educating CWDs, thus resulting in low enrollment. This lack of awareness also prevented parents from knowing which schools to choose for their children. Due to this lack of awareness, some parents perceived that having a child with a disability was a burden and believed there was no need to educate them. Additionally, it was noted that some parents were discouraging their children with disabilities, viewing education for them as a waste of resources, and others were keeping their CWDs hidden at home to avoid public scrutiny, often due to a lack of understanding. Explaining this challenge, a parent was quoted as saying:

Many parents do not know that children with disabilities can be accepted and study in private schools like other children. Many of them do not believe in taking their children with disabilities to schools and combining them with non-disabled children in school due to the fear of stigma. (Interview with a parent, on the 22/3/2024)

In support of these findings, one headteacher explained that:

The community lacks understanding of the need to educate the CWDs. Some parents or community members do not understand the process of enrolling a child with disability, which involves several steps until the child can be officially registered. There is a need for the parents' cooperation, for example, in following up on the child's health issues, to know what stage of understanding they have reached. This is needed at the district level, but other parents see it as a nuisance, or the school does not want to accept their children, so they decide to withdraw them from school, or some do not enrol them at all. (Interview with the Headteacher of School A, on the 19/3/2024)

The quote from the teacher highlights a gap in the community's understanding of the enrolment process for CWDs. Based on the findings, it was found that many parents were unaware of the necessary steps needed, thus leading to misconceptions that the school was unwilling to accept their child. This misunderstanding could result in parents withdrawing their children from school or choosing not to enrol them. As a result, it could hinder these children from getting access to education. The findings revealed that a lack of awareness among parents and the community remained a significant barrier to CWDs accessing their right to education.

4.3.4. Competitive pressures within the private school market

Headteachers who participated in the study explained that private schools operated as commercial institutions where academic performance was crucial for market competitiveness. As a result, these schools often avoided enrolling in CWDs, viewing them as slow learners who required extra effort to succeed. However, it should be noted that even with significant support, many CWDs might still struggle to meet the required performance standards, which could negatively impact the school's reputation. As it was found, this concern was making many private schools refuse to enrol these children. In explaining this, one headteacher was quoted as saying:

Private schools tend to prioritise educating children without disabilities, viewing themselves as commercial entities focused on results. There is a concern that enrolling children with disabilities could negatively impact the school's performance or lead to longer adjustment periods, thus hindering

academic success. As a result, schools often opt not to enrol these children to maintain their performance levels and avoid potential conflicts with the government, especially when lacking adequate infrastructure to support them. (Interview with the Headteacher of School C, on the 20/3/2024)

The headteacher's explanations highlight that private schools prioritise achieving good results, thus making them hesitate to enrol the CWDs, who they believe might hinder their performance. However, another teacher gave a different view, stating that some private schools were refusing to enrol the CWDs even if those children possessed high intellectual abilities:

Many private schools refuse to accept children with disabilities despite their intellectual abilities. It is unlikely to find a large private school without at least one child with a disability. Even when such children perform well in interviews, schools may reject them, claiming they did not pass, indicating a reluctance to enrol them regardless of their capabilities. (Interview with the Headteacher of School D, on the 22/3/2024)

The teacher highlighted that some schools intentionally avoided enrolling the CWDs, focusing solely on who could assist these children rather than considering their intellectual abilities. These respondents deemed this unfair. However, some participants contested this view, arguing that such discrimination was unacceptable. They emphasised that CWDs, like all individuals, were entitled to the potential to succeed in education if given proper support. The participants pointed out that many people with disabilities had been successfully employed due to the trust and opportunities provided to them during their education.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the status of private primary schools in providing inclusive education for children with disabilities (CWDs), focusing on accessibility and barriers to enrolment. These findings highlight the limited access to education for CWDs in private schools, with only 13 children enrolled in the four schools over seven years from 2017 to 2023. This situation indicates a broader neglect of CWDs in private schools. These trends are consistent with the data from the The United Republic of Tanzania, President's Office and Regional Administration and Local Government [46], which shows that the enrolment rates of CWDs in private schools in Tanzania ranged from 1.03% to 3.5% (table 1). The limited inclusion of CWDs in the private schools contrasts with Tanzania's educational policies and the National Strategy for Inclusive Education, which advocates for a shared responsibility between the government and the private sector [40]. This gap highlights a failure to uphold the principles of social equity theory, which envision education as a public good to be accessed equitably by all.

Despite low enrolment numbers, the findings indicated high retention rates for enrolled CWDs in the researched schools. All enrolled CWDs attended school regularly, transitioned through the grades, and completed their education without dropping out. No child with a disability was reported to have left school in any of the researched schools. This aligns with the findings of Opoku, Nketsia and Mohamed [29], which revealed the ability of private schools to support the education of CWDs and retain them in schools. On the contrary, the study by Asim, Chugunov and Gera [4] suggested that the retention rate in private primary schools for CWDs was moderate, noting that these schools enrolled a small number of CWDs.

Furthermore, inclusive infrastructure such as accessible classrooms, playgrounds, and dining facilities demonstrates that private schools can support CWDs, provided they comply with government regulations for accessibility [5]. These findings align with those of Wambura [50], who asserts that private schools provide a conducive and supportive environment that facilitates the education of CWDs. However, the study also found that these schools often avoided enrolling children with severe disabilities, such as those requiring Braille or sign language resources, due to the high costs associated with the specialised materials. Moreover, the significant shortage of special education teachers poses a critical barrier to inclusivity in private schools, as noted in public schools [25]. This shortage has led schools to admit only those children whose disabilities do not require specialised teaching. This undermines the social equity principle, which advocates for equal opportunities for all learners.

The findings also highlight that reluctance among private school owners to enrol CWDs deprives these children of their right to education. Strict enrolment policies and a lack of awareness among some owners further impair this issue, thus aligning with the findings of Ramberg and Watkins [32] who noted that private schools often exclude CWDs regardless of their cognitive abilities or family resources. Social equity theory highlights that such exclusion contradicts the notion of education as a fundamental right and public good. Moreover, fostering a mindset shift among school owners is critical, as Robinson [34] argues that providing inclusive education begins with valuing the right to education for all learners.

As identified in this study, the costs associated with providing education to CWDs are consistent with Opoku, Nketsia and Mohamed [29], who noted financial barriers in Ghanaian private schools. However, the findings in this study also highlight how government taxes increase these costs in Tanzania. This suggests a need for targeted support to enhance enrolment for CWDs and inclusivity in general.

Additionally, the high tuition fees charged by private schools create a barrier for low-income families, thus limiting the number of CWDs who can access private education. This economic inequity prevents many CWDs from benefiting from the resources available in private schools. Conversely, as Usman [49] suggests, private school administrators may embrace the enrolment of CWDs if financial agreements ensure desired academic outcomes, highlighting the importance of equitable financial arrangements for all stakeholders. Furthermore, market competition among private schools increases these inequities, as schools often prioritise academic performance over inclusivity to maintain their competitive advantage, as highlighted by Hunt [19]. This dynamism reinforces social inequality and emphasises the urgent need for policy reforms aimed at improving the enrolment of CWDs and advancing inclusivity in private institutions.

Raising awareness among parents and the broader community is critical to fostering equity in education. Research findings highlight that negative attitudes and a lack of understanding among parents are significant barriers to the enrolment of CWDs, as many families fail to acknowledge the value of education for these children. Similarly, Bhalalusesa [7] emphasised the impact of negative parental perceptions in restricting educational opportunities for CWDs. Transformative community engagement serves as a key strategy for promoting disability awareness and advocating for the rights of CWDs. This aligns with the recommendations of Bani Odeh and Lach [5], who insist on collaborative efforts among the government, private sector, and community stakeholders. Conversely, Alolayan [2] argues that parents can choose between inclusive or special schools for their children, and suggests that schools should actively advertise their services to raise awareness. It has been recommended that efforts be made to educate the community about the rights of CWDs to access education in any school setting.

6. Limitations of the study

The study sample was limited to four private primary schools in Moshi District in Kilimanjaro region, which may affect the overall representativeness of the findings despite the application of diverse data collection methods. Additionally, the study predominantly relied on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the broader data of private primary schools in Tanzania. Future research should consider utilising a larger, more diverse sample and employing a mixed-methods approach to achieve more reliable and comprehensive conclusions. Furthermore, incorporating the perspectives of other key stakeholders, including policymakers, special education specialists, and children with disabilities, could yield richer insights into the accessibility and barriers to inclusive education in private schools.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the provision of education for CWDs in private primary schools remains limited and selective. This situation is attributed to several factors, including the reluctance of school owners and administrators to enrol CWDs, the high operational costs of running schools, lack of awareness among parents and the community, and shortage of special education teachers. However, based on the findings of this study, the learning environment was conducive and satisfactory for the private primary schools that were accommodating the CWDs. Notably, there were no dropouts, and all enrolled CWDs were progressing through their education and completing their primary school.

To address the identified challenges, the study recommends improving awareness and training initiatives among school owners and staff to enhance their understanding and commitment to inclusive education. Such initiatives could contribute to increasing the enrolment of CWDs in private schools. Furthermore, private schools are encouraged to alleviate costs through financial support mechanisms, partnerships, and stakeholder collaborations. Advocating for inclusive education policies, strengthening school support services, and offering incentives for successful enrollment are vital measures. By undertaking these actions, private schools can create a more inclusive educational environment and eliminate barriers that hinder CWDs from accessing quality education.

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